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On the Integration of Cultural Knowledge Into College English Teaching

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Abstract

As a carrier of culture, English is of great cultural contents, and the cultural knowledge should be integrated into college English teaching. The author in this paper attempts to explore the integration of cultural knowledge in vocabulary teaching, listening and writing. Some suggestions on how to integrate cultural knowledge into college English teaching are provided in terms of college English textbooks, English tests and English teachers' cultural quality.

Key words: College English teaching; Cultural knowledge; Integration

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), English learning has become a required course in all colleges and universities in China. However, most college English learners realize that sometimes they have understood a joke in meaning, but they don't know where the humor is. Sometimes they will find it so difficult for them to further a communication with foreigners although they have learned English for more than 10 years. This

fact encourages us to think of what on earth the college English learners are short of. Culture is embedded in all aspects of language, and every change of social culture is reflected in language. What may lie beneath the language phenomenon are deep cultural connotations. As a carrier of culture, English is of great cultural contents, and we cannot ignore the importance of culture while teaching language. Therefore, the author in this paper attempts to explore the ways on how to integrate cultural knowledge into college English teaching in terms of vocabulary, listening and writing.

1. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Brown (1994) pointed out, "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one can not separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture." It has been widely recognized that language and culture are inseparable. Language is generally defined as the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs, or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression with the whole body of words and of methods of combining them used by a nation, people or race (Halliday, 1964, p.4). Language is a social practice, and it is the carrier of culture reflecting all aspects of a cultural community like experience, ways of life and morality. Culture is the social heritage of a people—those learned patterns of thinking, feeling and acting that transmitted from one generation to the next, including the embodiment of these patterns in material items (James, 1993). Namely, culture is the whole way of life of a certain community, which includes everything from outside actions to inner beliefs of a group of people. Idrus (2016, p.47) stated that in examining the communication behavior of different cultures in an interaction, there must be some form of shared understanding where meaning is concerned, and this shared understanding of meaning

then would have resulted in a sense of belonging that each culture may experience in every encounter. There is a great deal of agreement concerning that language and culture inextricably and implicitly affect each other. Language is intertwined with culture. It is an integral part of culture and “the most visible and available expression of a particular culture” (Brown, 1987, p.174). Firstly the discovery of new practices, tools or concepts that most members of a culture eventually accept may bring changes into language by producing correlative words to symbolize these discoveries, such as “internet”, “millennium bug”, and “special administrative region”. Secondly, different social environments may bring different connotations of the same word. For instance, because of the different climates in two countries, Chinese understand “summer” as “hot and unbearable”, but English as “warm and pleasant”. Thirdly, different thinking patterns may produce the different structures or expressions in discourse. Chinese people think in a circular way, while English natives in a linear way. So Chinese people are used to being not to the point and form a climax expressing way, while English natives are used to being to the point and form an anticlimax expressing way. Fourthly, different educational system may also produce different discourse. For example, traditional teaching method in China, which puts an emphasis on memory and grammar translation, results in an implicit expressing way, so Chinese students are very cautious to write essays. While native English speakers’ free expression of essays results from the cultural tradition with basis on phonetic language and emphasis on spoken expressions and passionate communication with others. Culture has a vital impact on English learning, and teachers should notice the cultural difference and transmit such knowledge through the teaching practice (Yuan, 2006, p.58).

In a word, almost all aspects of culture affect language to a great extent. Language is greatly affected by the culture in respect of vocabulary, grammar, discourse, metaphor, word association and so on. Firstly, culture affects vocabulary. Vocabulary is the most culturally-loaded part of language. The influence of culture on language most distinguishingly reflected in vocabulary includes (a) some words are peculiar to a certain culture, such as “hongbao”, “ganbu”, “kang” in Chinese and “cowboy”, “hippie” in English. (b) Some words have the same denotation but different connotations between different cultures, such as “worker”, “farmer” in English and “gongren”, “nongmin” in Chinese. (c) Some words categorize the same phenomenon in different concepts within different cultures. For example, “cousin” and “uncle” have different concepts between English and Chinese. (d) Most idioms and proverbs have certain cultural contents, such as “as timid as a hare” in English but “danxiaorushu” in Chinese. Secondly, culture influences grammar. For example, the structures with formal subject or object are very commonly used in English,

especially in scientific English, which fully embodies that Westerners put emphasis on formal thinking. Thirdly, culture influences discourse. Culture influences and constrains discourse from the following three aspects: (a) topic choice, such as weather, health, age and privacy; (b) accents and styles of discourse; (c) structural organization, such as coherence and order. Fourthly, culture affects metaphor in language phenomenon. Danesi (1993, p.495) states, “Metaphorical competence is closely linked to the ways in which a culture organizes its world conceptly.” An utterance such as “Thank you for your time” is related to an underlying metaphorically organized concept in American culture that “Time is money”. Lastly, culture also affects word association. Kolars (1963, p.300) pointed out, “experiences and memories of various kinds are not stored in common in some supra-linguistic form but are tagged and stored separately in the language subject used to define the experience himself.” For example, when New Year’s Day was presented in English, subjects responded with words such as “party” and “holiday”. When presented with the Chinese equivalent of the same word, however, subjects responded with typical Chinese terms, such as “Jiaozi” and “yasuiqian”. Language has obtained life and nutrition from culture by representing the experiences, ways of living and thinking, and morality within a cultural community.

Culturally loaded characteristic of language brings difficulty and challenge in English learning, but we cannot accordingly ignore the importance of cultural integration into English teaching. The integral relationship between culture and language teaching is a forceful proof of the necessity of cultural integration into college English teaching. It is a truism to say that teaching language is teaching culture.

2. INTEGRATING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

Before attending colleges or universities, English learners have all generally studied English for five or six years. Especially under the influence of the college entrance examination baton in China, they have a good command of grammar and a large vocabulary to a certain extent. But their understanding of vocabulary and grammar is superficial, and they often have little chance to go into the cultural level. Culture should be integrated into all aspects of college English learning which includes the teaching of vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation.

2.1 In Vocabulary Teaching

From the cognitive point of view, vocabulary categorization of human language basically includes the basic object level, the super-ordinate level and the subordinate level regardless of the differences between cultures. Categorization of the basic object level and super-

ordinate level are generally based on cognitive features rather than cultural features. While the categorizations of below the basic object level is usually based on cultural functions, and vocabulary at this level are tightly related to cultural social complexity. For instance, the subordinate words of “people”—“peasant”, the subordinate words of “color”—“blue”, “yellow” and so on, have different cultural connotations with “nongmin”, “lanse”, “huangse” in Chinese because of different social functions. Therefore, in vocabulary teaching English teachers should focus on the cultural factors of words on the subordinate level, and remind students of the cultural differences embedded in the words at the subordinate level. When introducing a word at the basic object level, teachers can list a series of the relative subordinate words, such as “peasant”, “farmer”; “blue”, “yellow” and so on, or help students categorize these words, and then make a contrast with the relative Chinese words. Through the contrastive teaching of subordinate words, a series of relative words which students have learned before can be activated, and the cultural differences embedded in these words can also be recognized more clearly. Thus students will have a deep and systematic understanding of the words, and their vocabulary can be enlarged as well. Meantime, culture should also be introduced into abstract words. Kolars (1963, p.300) find out in his experiment that “concrete stimulus subjects, such as “butterfly” and “tree”, tended to generate similar responses in both the native language and second language, but for abstract stimuli subjects, such as “like” and “hate”, more often than not produced culture-specific responses.” Therefore in the cultural integration into vocabulary teaching, English teachers should attach more importance to the abstract words.

From the semantic point of view, semantic evolvement of a word reflects the cultural evolvement, such as the input of new concepts and reconstruction of traditional concepts. In a world of rapid change, vocabulary in semantics is still changing. Nowadays a lot of new words or words with new meanings related to the internet come into emergence with the development of technology, such as “internet”, “e-mail”, “download” and the like. While college English learners generally have great interest in the new things, and they are willing to pursue and accept new concepts. If teachers can pay attention to the dynamic aspects of vocabulary with the cultural evolvement, and introduce timely the new meaning of the words or new words brought by the social development in vocabulary teaching in college English teaching, students’ enthusiasm in learning English will be greatly enhanced, and the relationship between teachers and students can also become closer. Take the word “Trojan” as an example. When teaching this word, teachers can first introduce the historic story “Trojan horse” to students, and then tell them nowadays it also refers to a kind of virus in computer. Thus students’ interest in learning English can greatly be stimulated through the introduction of cultural

information including literary quotations, new concepts and so on, together with the high relevance of these words with their daily life.

Finally, in vocabulary teaching in college English classroom, the introduction of a cultural history of the English language can help students not only learn vocabulary more easily through comparison and categorization, but also know about the causes and progress of a kind of language phenomenon so as to facilitate their English learning. For instance, French lords ruled Britain for three centuries in A.D.11. During this process, millions of French words have been brought into English, and many educated people talked in Latin, so modern English often has sets of three synonyms: one from English, one from French and one from Latin. This history also correspondingly influences the usage field of words: the Latin word is usually somewhat bookish, and the French one is often more formal than the English one. If teachers can introduce students this history when French ruled Britain in teaching some French words in English, such as “resume”, students can grasp these words more easily and completely. Thus it can be seen that the introduction of a cultural history of the English language also plays a very important role in vocabulary teaching.

In vocabulary teaching, ignorance of cultural differences will result in students’ misunderstanding of the words, and bring negative effects on their understanding of the whole English materials. Therefore, English teachers should attach great importance to the cultural aspects of vocabulary and help students to recognize the cultural differences in vocabulary for the improvement of English learning.

2.2 In Listening Teaching

In listening teaching, the improvement of students’ listening competence involves a good command of both linguistic and cultural knowledge. A failure to improve listening competence is a bottleneck on a road to successful English learning. Generally speaking, many students may encounter such questions in listening: provided with familiar materials, they can easily understand what the materials are telling them; but provided with unfamiliar materials, they will feel difficult to listen clearly and fail to grasp the general idea of the listening materials. Many listening materials are from the original Britain or American news report, such as BBC or VOA. These news reports are often referring to the current hot issues which include a lot of cultural information. If students have a good knowledge of these cultural facts, their listening comprehension will be greatly enhanced. For instance, when students are listening to a news report on Mid-Eastern issue, teachers could give a comprehensive introduction to the history of these countries and the causes of these issues in order to help students to eliminate the cultural obstacles. In listening comprehension, English teachers are obliged

to introduce the cultural information concerning the important and hot issues, not just giving the correct answers. Thus students' knowledge will be widened, their interest will be stimulated, and their listening competence will accordingly get improved owing to their familiarity to these materials.

2.3 In Writing Teaching

In writing, we have recognized that most of English discourses written by Chinese learners read so much like translations of Chinese, and it is very easy for us to distinguish which discourse is written by Chinese learners of English and which by a native speaker of English. Thomas (1983) claimed,

Chinese is a topic-prominent language, and that English is a subject-prominent language with respect to how both languages structure their sentence. Subject of each clause bears some semantic relations to the topic. If Chinese students are made aware of cultural and textual differences in rhetoric tradition between English and Chinese, it may help them to establish positive self-concept when experiencing difficulty in timed essay examination.

People from different cultures possess different thinking patterns, which are inevitably reflected on the language structure. A failure to write an authentic English essay mainly results from the fact that Chinese learners of English have no or little understanding of the cultural differences in thinking pattern. Therefore, in writing, English teachers should help students to set up a mental framework into the Western cultures by being exposed to all kinds of original English materials with different styles where the structures of culture are described and reflected.

Culture is a network of verbal and non-verbal communication. Except the verbal cultural knowledge, college English learners should also familiarize themselves with various forms of non-verbal cultural knowledge. Non-verbal cultural knowledge refers to the movement of our body, such as body postures, hand postures, eye behaviors, etc. Culture tends to determine the specific non-verbal behaviors that represent or symbolize specific thoughts, feelings or states of the participants. Non-verbal symbols are also conditioned and shaped by culture. Some non-verbal cues of the home culture are similar to those of the target culture, but some are completely different and should be avoided in the target culture. What may be a symbol of affirmation in one culture could be meaningless or even opposite in another. Non-verbal cultural knowledge occupies such an important role in our communication that college English learners should be cognizant of them. In cultural integration into college English teaching, students should be encouraged to have a clear mind of non-verbal cultural differences. The imparting of non-verbal and verbal cultural knowledge should happen at the same time in the cultural integration into college English classroom.

At last, the following two points should be kept in our mind in the process of imparting cultural knowledge. The first is that English teachers should introduce other cultures other than English, American and Chinese cultures. We can see from the evolution of English that the development of English has always been influenced by other cultures besides English and American cultures. Especially when English is used as a universal language and the trend of globalization occurs, English will undergo much more influences from other cultures around the world than before. Therefore, in the cultural integration into college English teaching, English teachers should always remind students of the influences of other cultures on English. The second is that a culture is enormous, and our learning is limited, so it is impossible and impractical for us to introduce all aspects of different cultures to students. In the cultural integration into college English teaching, English teachers should introduce those cultural factors which will bring main obstacles to communication and those which have an affinity with their major in university or their job after graduation. Thus English learners' interest can be stimulated, and they can understand the cultural differences in a more reasonable mind.

3. SUGGESTIONS ON CULTURAL INTEGRATION OF TEXTBOOKS, TESTS AND TEACHERS' CULTURAL QUALITY

The successful cultural integration into college English teaching depends heavily on the reform of examination and correlative textbooks, as well as the improvement of English teachers' cultural quality. Su (2004) ever pointed out that presently English teachers' quality is unsatisfying in our universities and middle schools. College English teachers cannot keep up with the trend of social development in teaching concept. With the reform of foreign language teaching on cultural factors, English teachers should always remind themselves of improving their cultural quality so as to be adept for the trend of cultural and economic globalization. Therefore, the author considers it very necessary to explore the issues on textbooks, English tests and English teachers in the cultural integration into college English teaching.

Nowadays as culture is attracting more and more attention in English teaching, some English textbooks are beginning to be compiled according to the cultural system, providing relevant cultural theme to be discussed and analyzed. Let's take College Experiencing English as an example. In this set of English textbook, linguistic materials are integrated with cultural content, the western cultural backgrounds have been well introduced, and there is also a column of culture salon currently unique to the cultural integration into college English teaching. However, it should be pointed out that the current reform

on textbooks cannot keep up with the need of a large quantity of English learners to learn culture, especially the evaluation of cultural study in exercises in textbooks and English tests are very insufficient to meet the need of culture teaching and learning. Therefore, the discussion of reform on traditional system of examination and textbooks in the following text will mainly concern the evaluation of cultural study in English tests and textbooks. The cultural integration into college English teaching should take account of the learners' present levels of cognitive, psychological, moral, social and affective development, and their specific attitudes, perceptions and experiences of particular foreign cultures, while the evaluation of cultural study provides students with feedback and keeps teachers accountable in their English teaching, so it is a necessary component of cultural integration into college English teaching. As an old saying goes, "if it isn't tested, it isn't taught." The cultural integration into college English teaching is the case. If college English learners' cultural study isn't evaluated, their improvement of intercultural communicative competence and overall quality will be greatly affected. Although most foreign language teachers don't deny the importance of cultural study in vocabulary, discourse analysis and literature, few teachers evaluate whether students are attaining their goals owing to the shortage of correlative examinations and textbooks on cultural study. Many teachers are uncertain about what their specific goals are and how these goals may be evaluated. The author considers that through evaluation of cultural study in the exercises of textbooks and English tests, English learners can know about their cultural learning status, and their interest and enthusiasm for further study can be stimulated; English teachers can make clear of the students' progress in cultural study so that they can improve their teaching methods; Educational scholars and educationists can make English teaching syllabus more effective. Evaluation of cultural study should run through the whole stages of cultural integration into college English teaching and be integrated into the exercises of college English textbooks and English tests.

3.1 College English Textbooks

Currently college English textbooks are getting reformed greatly in culture learning. For example, cultural backgrounds are integrated in the notes of some college English textbooks and culture salon has been taken as a part of the whole text in *College Experiencing English*. However, the exercises about cultural study are seldom referred to in many textbooks. Most exercises still focus on the linguistic forms including vocabulary, structure and reading comprehension, while the cultural competence, the cultural connotations of words, phrases, values and behaviors are generally ignored. Let's take *Twenty-first Century College English* as an example. Exercises have been described in the instructions of this set of textbook as follows: exercises of text A include pre-reading Activities,

Reading Aloud, Comprehension of the Text, Vocabulary, Word Building, Structure, Cloze, Translation, Reading Analysis and Structured Writing. From here we can see that almost all these exercises are serving for students' understanding of the text and the linguistic knowledge, such as prefix, suffix, sentence structure, phrase and so on, while the evaluation of students' cultural study has been ignored. To fulfill the cultural study in college English classroom, exercises in college English textbooks should attach equal importance to both language points and cultural evaluation so as to deepen English learners' understanding of foreign cultures and improve their intercultural competence. Besides the integration of more exercises in respect of culture into the college English textbooks, English teachers should also collect some typical cultural materials to have students discuss in the process of analyzing texts. If possible, English teachers can still have students do some dissertations on some cultural phenomenon. Thus English learners' cultural study will not be limited to the learning, but also involve production, and their understanding of cultural differences and cultural awareness will be enhanced in the production of cultural study.

3.2 English Tests

With the development of society, more and more people have realized the importance of learning English well and getting an English certificate, so different kinds of English tests occur in China. However, few of them take the cultural evaluation into consideration, and great importance has still been attached to the cognitive understanding and rote reproduction of language rules rather than communicative and sociolinguistic competence. The author considers that cultural items should be integrated into all kinds of subjects of examination, including dialogues in listening, the understanding of some words in the vocabulary, the understanding of some expressions or the whole text of reading comprehension, writing and the like. Prompt and effective feedback in English tests can effectively enhance students' cultural study. The author believes that with the reform on CET-4 & CET-6 along with the attention drawn to cultural factors in English teaching, the corresponding cultural evaluation system will be well built in examinations, or at least the proportion of cultural study will be greatly increased.

3.3 English Teachers' Cultural Quality

Chastain (1976, p.405) has ever described, "one danger in teaching culture is that the second-language teachers may attempt to teach culture when they do not have the knowledge or expertise to do so. Such attempts may do more harm than good". If English teachers don't know the importance of cultural integration into college English teaching or have little knowledge of the cultural aspects in English teaching, they are certainly unable to teach

culture well. Furthermore, the teachers themselves will form an obstacle on the way to improve English learners' intercultural competence and overall quality. English teachers are transmitter of another language and culture, if they have little understanding of the target culture and fail to help students to bridge the home and target culture, college English learners will also be doubtful about their English teachers' credibility to serve as a cultural informant. Teachers with cultural quality have always been regarded as one of the most important factors in the cultural integration into college English teaching. A successful cultural integration involves qualified teachers in teaching both culture and language, but currently most English teachers' cultural quality is not satisfying, and cannot keep up with the need of current cultural study. Under the influence of traditional English teaching, most serving English teachers in China have been trained linguistically and pedagogically, so they are qualified to teach students linguistic knowledge, but not to deal with cultural matters effectively and confidently owing to their poor cultural knowledge. Even if those teachers have realized the importance of cultural integration into English teaching or have a little knowledge of cultural aspects, they are inclined to focus on the cultural knowledge and pay less attention to the process of adaptation to the target culture in the English teaching practice. They just circle about the boundaries of the target culture, and can not pass the bridge between the target and home culture. If the teachers fail to access to the deep level of cultural aspects and provide extra systematic description and analysis of the target culture, students' attention cannot be attracted, their interest in cultural study will be lost, and finally the improvement of intercultural communicative competence and overall quality will be restricted.

English teachers' cultural quality plays a key role in students' cultural study, then how shall their cultural quality be improved? The author in this thesis proposes that firstly the educational institutions should provide both serving and future English teachers with systematic training on cultural aspects including cultural knowledge, cultural awareness and skills so as to ensure them to be a qualified transmitter of another language and culture. Secondly, college English teachers should be given the opportunities to go abroad and immersed in the real American and English cultural environment. The English teachers' personal experiences with the target culture can help them to set up their credibility as a cultural informant among students. Lastly, a foreign language teacher should have a good command of colorful Chinese culture. They should make clear of both the target culture and home

culture, and act as the transmitter of both foreign and home cultures.

CONCLUSION

Based on the inseparable relationship between language and culture, the author considers that learning a language is not limited to learning the language itself, but involves learning the culture in which language is operative. With the recognition of importance of culture in foreign language teaching, attention has been drawn from whether culture should be integrated into foreign language teaching to how to integrate culture into foreign language teaching in terms of vocabulary, listening, writing and so on. Traditional examination-oriented education is the largest obstacle on the way to successful cultural integration into college English teaching. Designing correlative college English textbooks with cultural information and improving English teachers' cultural quality are the necessary factors in cultural integration into college English teaching. Therefore, the current examination system and college English textbooks should also be reformed, together with the college English teachers' cultural quality improved.

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